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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000882

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [MCAP](#) [PGOV](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: ARMY SCORES INTELLIGENCE, PR VICTORY IN ATTACK ON
MAOIST CAMP

REF: KATHMANDU 872

Classified By: A/DCM MICHAEL HOZA. REASON: 1.5(B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Royal Nepal Army (RNA) troops have been engaged since late May 2 in an attack on what may be a major Maoist logistics base in Lisne Lek, Rolpa District in western Nepal. According to the RNA, the Maoists, who have sustained at least 100 casualties, are attempting to withdraw from the area in small groups, without engaging government troops. The RNA is still conducting blocking operations and expects to recover a significant number of weapons previously stolen by the insurgents from the security forces in previous attacks. The RNA attack was prompted by information on the camp's location from a local villager--the first time, to our knowledge, the army has proven able to act on intelligence so successfully. Reports of the attack--and positive reaction from Parliamentarians invited to visit the relevant RNA division headquarters--are giving the Government of Nepal (GON) and the RNA a timely public relations boost just as Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba prepares to meet President Bush in Washington May 7. End summary.

FIGHTING IN ROLPA CONTINUES

2. (SBU) Fighting between Royal Nepal Army (RNA) troops and Maoist insurgents at what appears to be a major Maoist logistics base in Lisne Lek, Rolpa District, continued for the fourth day today (Reftel), according to Director of Military Operations Brig. Gen. Pradeep Malla. Malla reiterated that information, conveyed from the field in western Nepal by radio, remains sketchy. At least 100 insurgents have been confirmed dead, Malla asserted; blood trails and RNA rounds fired are pushing RNA estimates of Maoist dead past the 300 mark, however. (Note: Local press reports on May 6 noted that only 15 bodies had been recovered thus far. End note.) Only three RNA soldiers and one civilian policeman have been killed in the fighting to date. Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Pyar Jung Thapa told the Ambassador late May 4 that he believed Maoist casualties were between 350 to 400.

3. (C) According to Malla, the RNA first learned the location of the site from a local villager, who reported insurgents gathering in the jungle with food supplies, weapons, and water buffalo. On May 2 three platoons from the 4th Brigade in Surkhet District were dispatched toward the area from three different sides. Insurgents fired on one of the platoons, forcing it to withdraw to a 6,000-foot elevation (Reftel). A local journalist said RNA sources had told him the Maoists fired with machine guns and SLRs captured from the RNA during the attacks on RNA bases at Dang and Achham. The platoon was encircled, and the Maoists began launching human wave attacks, firing weapons and throwing pipe bombs, in an apparent attempt to get the RNA to use up its ammunition. The soldiers could hear the Maoist commanders ordering the cadre forward by megaphone. The RNA source said the encircled platoon selectively picked off the attackers in the human wave, instead of wasting ammunition in long bursts of firing. Members of the platoon estimated they saw at least 350 bodies of insurgents in the vicinity.

4. (C) Later that night, the platoon retreated from the elevation to a more defensible position. Some reinforcements arrived the morning of May 3, but when the reinforced company went back up the hill, the piles of bodies seen the night before had disappeared. There was evidence of bodies having been dragged through the underbrush, according to the source. Malla reported further reinforcements (about 200 troops) reached the area mid-day May 4. At present, Malla said, the Maoists are generally not fighting back, but are instead attempting to retreat from the densely forested area in groups of two or three, likely in an effort to re-consolidate personnel and weapons in another location. The RNA is still establishing blocking positions in an effort to interdict the retreating insurgents. He could offer no figure on the

possible number of Maoist prisoners captured thus far.

MAJOR BASE?

15. (C) Malla said the villager's information had helped the RNA stumble upon what seems to have been a major logistics base for the Maoists. Troops in the area have discovered 1,000 dishes and plates cached in the jungle, he reported, as well as other cooking gear, bunkers, and houses with (presumably Maoist) families living in them, indicating that the area was used as a large staging area for the insurgents. The RNA anticipates being able to recapture from the area at least half of the weapons stolen from Army and police in previous Maoist attacks, Malla said, without explaining the basis for this estimate. He speculated that the insurgents were likely staging for a major attack--possibly on district headquarters in Rolpa--in the near future. The RNA's aggressive action had pre-empted the planned strike, he noted with satisfaction. Lt. Gen. Thapa also believes that the Maoists had assembled in number in advance of a planned major attack.

MORALE BOOST

16. (C) The good news trickling out of Rolpa seems to have given the beleaguered Government of Nepal (GON) a significant morale boost just as Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba prepares to meet President Bush in Washington May 7. A local journalist who attended a speech given by the often less than fully articulate Prime Minister May 3 in Kathmandu said he had not seen Deuba so forceful and confident in his public comments--in which he discounted prospects for peace talks until the Maoists lay down their arms--since his early days as a freedom fighter, before Panchayat regime torture permanently damaged his tongue. Also atypical was the RNA's decision to invite 17 Members of Parliament for a tour, escorted by CGS Gen. Thapa, of some of the western division's area of operations May 5. (Note: The idea of inviting the politicians had been first suggested to the RNA by the Ambassador. End note.) The tour was apparently well received by both ruling and Opposition MPs, who were quoted in the local press voicing (equally atypical) praise for the RNA's efforts. Embassy DATT suggested to Malla that the RNA invite the press corps and resident DATTs on a tour of the site once the battle concludes; Malla agreed.

COMMENT

17. (C) Although details of the engagement remain hazy, the verdict from the local press, the GON, and the RNA is that the Army has scored a significant victory. From what we can tell right now, we would agree. While the casualty count sounds a bit skewed, the real significance of this battle lies not in the number of Maoists killed or captured, or even in the volume of weapons the RNA (perhaps optimistically) expects to recover, but in several other factors. With this engagement, the RNA has proven that it can react to reliable intelligence to seize the initiative from the insurgents. The villager's willingness to volunteer the information can only count as a major breakthrough in the ongoing battle for hearts and minds. The RNA's invitation to Paliamentarians, coupled with a possible follow-up invitation to the press corps, demonstrates the army's evolving awareness of the importance of public relations to the success of their efforts--also a significant breakthrough. Finally, the Maoists' response to the RNA initiative is also instructive. In the past, the insurgents have typically chosen their own battle sites, launching surprise attacks on police or army locked in static positions, such as a barracks or police post. That the insurgents are apparently electing to retreat when surprised in the field indicates that they are likely unable to engage the RNA in a meeting encounter. It is too soon to tell if the RNA has turned the corner in this fight, but the signs so far are encouraging.

MALINOWSKI